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## Islam's Understanding of Art and the Prohibition of Images in Light of Sacred Scripture

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Aziz Doganay, PhD

In order to correctly perceive and interpret Islam's view of art, first we have to arrive at a common decision regarding what art is. However, this subject is a long matter that goes beyond the scope of this article. It is necessary to point out that art is not just making pictures and statues. Art is a work of discovering details, understanding and portraying profound feelings, and living and sharing through experiencing feelings. Art is a universal language of emotion. Images and musical notes only comprise alphabets of this language.

In order to get to the roots of the matter, first it is necessary to by examining the attitudes and applications towards art of the monotheistic religions before Islam to the extent they are reflected in sacred books.

As far as we know, there are no open statements in pre-Islamic holy books or in the Quran and hadiths (sayings of the Prophet) that can help us make a clear definition of art. The term "esthetic" is a new concept. "Beauty" is usually given the meaning of goodness in holy texts. Appearing more as moral advice, these statements inform us about the essence necessary for art.

Since many people equate the creation of a visual work of art with making a picture or statue, when art in Islam is mentioned, everyone focuses on the picture prohibition and debates about the legitimacy of this matter have taken place. Actually, the situation is not much different for music and even literature. Here, we are going to take up the issue more the perspective of the plastic arts.

When holy books are examined, it is seen that the broadest information on the field of artistic activities is found in the Old Testament. Here Allah commanded Moses for man to make a dwelling where they could worship Him. Details of this dwelling such as which materials and technique were to be used and the quality to be made are related in the holy book. The measurement, shape and even colors of the work to be made are described. So much so, that nothing is left to individual choice:

- "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it" (Exodus 25/8-9).
- "Moreover thou shalt make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen, and blue, and purple, and scarlet: with cherubim of cunning work shalt thou make them" (Exodus 26/1).

Saying in the Old Testament, "**Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them**" (Exodus 20/4-5), the limits of this art were drawn with definite lines and the prohibition on images was put in second place in the Ten Commandments given to Moses.

The same command is effective for Christianity because it is said in the New Testament, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matthew 5/17). Some researchers saying that Allah commanded Moses to make a chest for the Sacred Tablets and for cherubim to be put on the chest (Exodus 25/18-19), and showing the story of Prophet Solomon (Saba 34/13) in the Quran as evidence, they claimed that the prohibition on images is just for things that can be worshiped and that there is no prohibition of images in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament it is explained, although not in as much detail as in the Old Testament, with various comparisons by bringing together beauty and goodness, that it is necessary to have harmony and balance between two things and that it is necessary to be sincere in our efforts.

- "O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things" (Matthew 12/34-35).
- "No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment; for that which is put in to fill it up taketh the garment, and the rent is made worse" (Matthew 9/16).
- "Therefore, whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock" (Matthew 7/24-25).

Other than the above statements, nothing is said about art and image in the New Testament. As can be understood in these statements, **just as in the order of life attempted to be established by all monotheistic religions, unity, integrity, harmony and sincerity are looked for, so are order, harmony and sincerity sought in art.** In the New Testament where it is indicated that Jesus came to complete the law brought by Moses, there is no statement to the effect that the prohibition on images in the Old Testament has been rescinded. The iconoclastic movement in history is one of the most striking events that appeared as a result of this prohibition.

The matter of how this prohibition was reflected on life is the topic of another issue. For if Jesus, who never went to a church in his life, would see today's churches, especially Roman catholic churches, full of pictures and statues mainly the influence of pagan Roman culture, it would be interesting to see his reaction. It is written in the New Testament in a striking way how he criticized the Jews who had turned the Great Temple into a bazaar and threw them out saying, "It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves" (Matthew 21/13).

In the Quran, the last book of the monotheistic religions, there is no statement forbidding the producing of pictures, statues and similar art branches. Now, let us turn to some statements in the Quran that can be related to art:

- "So blessed be Allah, the most beautiful to !" (Muminun 23/14).

It can be understood "the most beautiful" here that Allah is the most beautiful Creator and s the most beautiful. The creations of man are only individual efforts at artistic creation that interpret the beauty d by Allah.

- *"Look at Allah's dye. And who has a better dye than Allah's? And we are His worshippers"* (Al-Baqara 2/138).
- *"He has d the heavens and the earth in just proportions, and has given you shape, and made your shapes beautiful: and to Him is the final goal"* (Al-Tagabun 64/3).
- *"And the Firmament has He raised up, and He has set up the Balance of Justice"* (Al-Rahman 55/7).
- *"We have indeed d man in the best of molds"* (Al-Tin 95/4).
- *"But He fashioned him in due proportion, and breathed into him something of His spirit. And He gave you (the faculties of) hearing and sight and feeling (and understanding: Little thanks do ye give!)"* (Al-Sajda 32/9).
- *"Verily in the heavens and the earth, are Signs for those who believe"* (Al-Jathiya 45/3).

It is indicated in the above verses that Allah d man in the most beautiful shape and d the universe with great wisdom, and that there is measure and balance in the creation of nature. The proportion known today as the "golden mean" appears in the measurements of the human body which was d in the most beautiful shape. Indicating that ears, eyes and hearts were given to man, the Quran reminds that there are signs in the heavens and earth for believers, and it showed the way to read these signs. These roads pass through the eyes, ears and heart.

After Allah mentions the perfection of the things He d, He calls upon man to contemplate and, understanding the refined points lying in this perfection, to feel them deeply. There is not much to say for eyes that see. The universe is a book one end to another for those who know how to look and see. The ears were d to hear the harmony and rhythm of this flawless order and to sense the music together with the spectacle perceived by the eyes. The heart, on the other hand, is the crucible of love, affection and ingenious art. No work that has not been filtered by the heart can carry artistic coquetry.

In order to perceive the Islamic understanding of art, it is sufficient to look at the Quran itself. Possessing an unattainable literary mastery, the Holy Quran is a challenge in this field. This challenge of the Quran is expressed with the words, "Then produce a Sura like thereunto!" (Baqara 2/23). The same challenge is true for the music hidden in its sounds. Esthetic arts developing around the Quran like calligraphy, gilding and binding are esthetic delights Islamic civilization gained for the world of art. Because the Holy Quran gives importance to pure feelings, it did not put concrete limitations on art as the Old Testament did.

As mentioned above, while the Quran does not make any prohibition on making images, in some hadiths there is a strong stand against them. Actually this stand directly opposes idolatry and vehicles to idolatry, because throughout history pictures and statues have been the main objects representing idolatry.

With very different statements on the subject of making images, the event most frequently referred to is a situation regarding Aisha: She hung a curtain with pictures on it at the door to her room. When the Prophet (pbuh) took it down, Aisha made a pillow cover the material, and the Prophet did not object to that (Muslim, Clothing 93).

Well, was this curtain hung at the door for the purpose of ostentation or decoration? What was the place where the curtain was hung and what was its function? Why was the Prophet upset with it?

Many commentaries state that the Prophet took this curtain down because the pictures on it disturbed his focus during prayer, but the position of the curtain is not fully explained. This curtain is indirectly referred to in the Quran: "If you ask his wives for anything, speak to them behind a curtain. This is more chaste for your hearts and their hearts" (Ahzap 33/53). This curtain can be a curtain dividing a section of a house or a curtain covering the entrance door. There is a strong probability that it is the curtain mentioned in Surat al-Hujurat (section of Hujurat in the Quran) that covered the door opening the rooms of the Prophet's wives to the Masjid-i Nabi. In other words, this curtain covered an opening in the wall of the Masjid-i Nabi that served as a door. The front side of the curtain must have directly faced the masjid and the back side faced the room. While not objecting to the material with pictures on it being made into a pillow cover that would be sat upon or leaned upon, of course, as a prophet who was dedicated to struggling against idolatry, he would not be pleased with these pictures at the door in the wall of the masjid. It is necessary to remember that the pictures on the curtain remained on the material after it was made into a pillow. The only thing that has changed is the location of the picture.

If our Prophet's life is examined, it is immediately noticed applications of it how his understanding of life was full of esthetic feelings. This hadith related by Ibn Sa'd is a good example of this:

- One day the Prophet went to a funeral. Seeing a slight engraving mistake in the grave that bothered the eye, he ordered that it immediately be corrected. Someone asked if this would bother the dead person. He said, "Actually these kinds of things do not bother the dead or make them uncomfortable, but it is to make it attractive to the living."

These words of a Prophet who wanted a visually displeasing flaw to be corrected in a grave that was going to be covered with dirt a few minutes later comprise the essence of Islam's understanding of art: "**Allah is beautiful and loves beauty**" (Tirmizi, Manners/41; Muslim, Faith/147). This essence is hidden in fine details developed around the belief of tawhid (unity). In order to catch these fine points, it is necessary to follow the path Allah has shown.



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